



CHILDREN'S BOOKS AND THE MEDIA

—SWAPNA DUTTA*

In this fast, quick, jet age of ours, if there is one thing we really lack, is time. Time for leisure, time to look around and sometimes time to think. But if there is one thing for which every one of us, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, rural and urban—somehow finds time, it is the media. The media in some form or the other, be it newspapers, magazines, radio or the television. Not just because we are interested, but because we cannot do without keeping track of what is happening all around us and living accordingly. The media is the most powerful, sure-shot means of getting a message right across the country, in shaping public opinion, in moulding their tastes and priorities. There is very little it cannot achieve if it really makes up its mind.

And this is specially true in the case

of books. That is why it is strange and unfortunate that the media should be so little concerned about promoting good books for children. I would not say that they are exactly callous so far as mere reporting goes. Important happenings in the world of children—including publication of books and awards—are reported as news items. But that is about all. There are no proper reviews of the award-winning books—unless it happens to be a foreign award like Anita Desai's book *Village by the Sea*. No interviews with the authors. No attempts to bring the authors and the children face-to-face, informing the readers of their reactions.

It is bad enough that in a large country like ours, where so much importance is given to literature in general, children's literature should be totally overlooked

*Mrs. Swapna Dutta is M.A. in English literature. Swapna has been writing for children since 1968. Her books and translations have been published by Children's Book Trust, National Book Trust, Thomson Press, Vikas Publishers and Orient Longmans. She was awarded the National Fellowship by the Ministry of Culture from 1984-86 and has won several other awards for her poems and stories. She represented India in the Workshops on Book Production by the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO, Japan in 1986.

and ignored. It is not like this in the rest of the world. There are prestigious awards for children's books such as the Hans Christian award and the Nubury Award along with adult awards. In India, we have prestigious national awards like the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Jnanpeeth Award for adult books, but hardly any awards for children's books. Except, of course, the NCERT awards and the CBT awards. But very few people get to know anything about these award-winning books, even when they are really good, because there are no write-ups at all—whether they are good, bad or indifferent!

What I would really like to know is why should the media—I'm talking about the press at the moment—be so prejudiced against us? So reluctant to touch children's books with the long end of a barge-pole? Why are they so unwilling to make a proper survey of children's books available within the country, read them and evaluate them like they do other books? If they feel that children's writers are not fulfilling their expectations or falling short of good standard or not writing about some significant aspects of modern life or not laying enough stress on our history and heritage, let them confront the authors and hear what they have to say. All good writers welcome constructive criticism and concrete suggestions, and of course, they are prepared for brick bats as well! Because ultimately, it all helps in promoting good literature.

Is the press at all concerned about promoting good literature for children? It is not enough to bring out a few children's magazines—even if they are good — and just a page for children in the newspapers. In any case, not all national dailies have a children's page either! The ones that do have children's section, carry just a few stories for and by children, a poem or two, some puzzles and quiz, may be a few lines

about children's books and that is all. I am not criticizing the page itself. We are thankful that it is there. But it is not enough. The children's writers have the right to expect a great deal more from the press.

Promoting good books for children is not just a children's issue. It is a national one. Children are our future. It is our duty to see that they grow up with the right task in books, to provide them the books to cater to their needs, find out what they are really looking for, and what is most important, let them know what is already available. It is not just our concern. It ought to be everybody's concern. This is exactly where the press can come to our aid. This cannot be done by just providing a children's page which is mostly read just by the children.

The magazine section of newspapers should also carry reviews and write-ups about children's books, about what the writers and illustrations have to say, about the problems they have to face. The general reading public should be made aware of what the situation really is, what books are available and what they are like. Even today, there are thousands of parents who think that the only books for children we have are the Nancy Drews, The Hardy Boys and The Famous Fives! Some of them do know about Feluda and Faster Fenny as well, but they are in a minority. We do see a few articles on children's literature once in a way. But very very seldom. It is not enough to have any kind of an impact on the reading public.

I would like to add here that the media is leaving children's writers rigidly alone. This does not merely affect them as writers; but it also hurts the national image. To give a concrete example, the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO has been organising an annual workshop for children's writers and illustrators for the last

20 years, with delegates from 16 different countries. There is a book exhibition on the first and last day. I had been there in 1986 as a delegate and was shocked to see that although every other country had a marvellous display of children's books, there were hardly any books from India. The delegates had been asked to carry just six of their own books. I asked the others how they had managed to bring so many books. They said they had not. It was the publishers who had sent all those books on their own, because the media had given publicity about the workshop and the exhibition a month before they arrived. I am sure most of our publishers did not even know about it, because there was no write-up of any kind in any of the newspapers. They just did not think it of any importance! Similarly, when our AWIC and the NBT represented India at the Children's Book Fair at Bologna, there was hardly any mention of it before or after. We had tried to carry the best books from India and project a good image of our country. I am sure many more publishers would have cooperated with us if only the print media had come to our aid.

So much for the press. I cannot really say that the radio has been indifferent to promoting children's literature, because they do have good programmes for children. I remember listening to several excellent stories being serialized over the radio right from my childhood days, listening to excellent radio-plays, hearing the voices of my favourite authors. But once again, I'm speaking of Bengal.

But I know there are good children's programmes in the national network too. And discussion of relevant problems. Also book-talk. But the problem here is—who listens to the radio now, even if the programme is good? Specially after 6 o'clock?

This brings me to the most important part of the media—important because it

is accessible to both the educated and the uneducated, literate and illiterate—the television.

Here again I would like to start with a personal observation. When I walked into one of the recent book fairs, I was surprised to see a crowd of high school children making a bee-line for a stall selling books by Indian authors. I was curious to see which of our books were doing such good business and was not really surprised to see that the books were *Nirmala*, *Tamas*, *Rag Durbari*, *Pratham Pratishruti*, *Srikant*, *Vikram and Betal*, *Swami and his Friends*. Also, Indian editions of *Great Expectations*, *The Invisible Man*, *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

All these titles had one factor in common—they had all been serialised on Door-darshan. Most of them had been fairly well-produced. Even where the production had been poor and amateurish, the strong storyline and the immortal characters created by the authors had carried the serial through. The older children had immediately recognised them as good books and felt attracted enough to buy them—in spite of all *The Nancy Drews*, *Hardy Boys*, *Secret Sevens*, *Superman* in the market.

This brought to my mind three significant points about which I was strongly convinced.

1. Children have an innate good taste and an instinctive ability to pick out, the real thing, settle for the better choice, whenever it is available.
2. They may go for *The Nancy Drews* and *The Hardy Boys* because these stories have the added attraction of presenting a different world and an unfamiliar life-style. But this does not mean that they do not enjoy or appreciate Indian stories by Indian authors—provided they are good.
3. The tremendous impact and influence of T.V. on readers, specially children, who are constantly in search of their true iden-

tity trying one things after another, seeking, shaping and finalising their own values and priorities. The T.V. can really shape and mould their taste for good books. It can virtually make or mar their taste for books.

Again, is the audio-visual media at all concerned about promoting good books for children? I mean, consciously?

Of course, children's writers are happy to see the media, promoting epics, classics, history, heritage and literature in general. Although these are primarily meant for adults, children can and do appreciate them. But it is not enough. They have the right to demand something more — something which is exclusively their own, depicting their world, their adventures, their point of view. But just any crap which some producers consider to be good enough for children but the real thing. The best we have in the country. Has Doordarshan projected even a fraction of good children's literature which we do have? The answer is NO!

There have been dozens of so-called children's serial and children's films. But except for a handful, most of them have been non-descript, boring, clumsy lifts from foreign stories or downright atrocities! They are bad not because producers lack money or stars, but because they have tried to manage without a proper story and also because they have no direct contact with children. They just have a vague notion of what children ought to like and ought to get—a little clowning, a little slapstick, a song or two, a bit of loud sermonizing, a handful of camera gimmicks laced with a generous dash of *dishum dishum*! That, according to them, is a sure-shot formula for children. A mere clerk is good enough for shoving these ingredients into a churning and shaking it up! They do not need books. They do not need authors! What saving!

As I have already said before, we have dozens of good books for children in our 16 regional languages and also in English. Why are they not taken up by the T.V.? If language is the problem, there are several translators amongst us who would be ready to present them in English or Hindi. Even if they are reluctant to spend any money on translation and want stories just in English and Hindi, there should not be any problem. Stories by writers like Arup Kumar Datta, Nilima Sinha, Sarojini Sinha, Dilip Salfi, Kavary Bhatt, Poile Sengupta, Singrun Srivastav, Subhadra Sengupta and many others have always been very popular with children. Some of them would make excellent T.V. adaptations.

It seems to me that the audio-visual media are terribly reluctant to bring children's writers into the picture. They seem determined to keep them at bay at all costs. They do not mind dealing with the dead ones. The dead ones would not protest when their names go totally unacknowledged. Nor would they demand any payment. But a living author is a different cup of tea!

You might ask—well, even if the audio-visual-media do not approach the writers, what stops the writers from approaching the media? Why can they not spell out what they want to do in order to promote good books for children?

I would like to put it across that there is no lack of effort from the side of the authors even it means banging their head against a solid wall of non-cooperation and a rigid lack of interest.

The media seem to regard them as glorified extras who have nothing more to do than provide the basic concept. They have no right to expect acknowledgement and no right to expect payment. They are meant to thrive on just ideals and thin air! The producer does not mind paying for the *kesh-bhusha* and *besb-bhusha*, the wardrobe-

selector and the mockfight-composer and what have you. The author gets no more than a vague promise of being acknowledged and paid in some distant future. Even if he or she manages to get a pittance for the story, he/she is not allowed any say in the scripting. Sometimes it is distorted beyond recognition so it is no credit to the author when it is finally telecast!

And yet, there is a great deal the T.V. can do in inspiring children to read, in promoting good books. At the IBBY seminar held at Oslo in 1988, there was a very interesting paper by Jerzy-M Ziminzki on "Inspirative television for children" in which she says. "It is a fact that television can play a big part in promoting reading among children. An active, inspirative television is capable of restoring and strengthening the role of the book in the child's education.

The mere presentation of the book on

T.V. is not sufficient for winning readers. It is necessary to create new forms of discussions between the television and the child. Stimulating a child's active attitude by television can bind the child to the book forever. And this should be the aim of our work.

I cannot understand why there should be such total lack of communication between children's writers and the media. Or, why they should be so unwilling to bring them into the picture, and get help from them. They are not ogres, after all! They ought to good books for children. They should work together, help and cooperate with one another to find the best stories, present them in the best possible way, doing full justice to the original. Surely, children have the right to expect it. Can children's writers not join hands in all sincerity to promote and provide good books for children?

Television could do wonders in solving the most vital problems of the country if channelised in the right direction. Television ought to expand people's consciousness to enrich their minds and in the process bring about aesthetic sophistication.